

Baishnab Pani

Hemant Kumar Das



Makers of Indian Literature

The sculpture reproduced on the end paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunkonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.

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Contents

Preface

My interest on Baishnab Pani, dates back to 1950, when during my early childhood days, I came in contact with the *Geetavinayas* of this eminent *yatra*-wright. In those days, Pani's open-air plays were enacted to packed audience and his beautiful music moved from lip to lip throughout Orissa. Then, while working for my thesis on drama, I came in close contact with his writings. Presently many of his works are not traceable. However, one can safely judge the calibre of this talented artist and litterateur from whatever is available.

Pani had a colourful life, where success and failure went hand in hand. In this monograph, I have tried to discuss and analyse his literary activities, keeping in view mostly the non-Oriya readership. Pani's life-long cultural pursuits, diverse in nature, covered different fields, e.g. social reforms, education, politics, health and philosophy. Pani is a great name in the history of modern Oriya *yatra* literature. A pioneer *yatra*-wright in Oriya, he has given lustre to a neglected branch of performing art. With a deep sense of patriotism, he raised his voice in his plays against the colonial rule.

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Hemant Kumar Das

1

The Origin and Development of Oriya *Yatra*

Orissa had a long tradition in folk-drama, which grew side by side with the theatre of the intellectuals. Historical evidences are available about the dramatic performances in Orissa from the days of the famous Emperor, Kharavela before Christian era. He was a great patron of music, dance and drama. In his Hatigumpha rock inscription he has introduced himself as *Gandharva Veda Vudho* (an expert in Gandharva vidya or art). Towards the eighth and ninth centuries, Sanskrit plays were written and staged in Orissa. Murari Misra, an eminent dramatist, wrote *Anargha Raghab Nataka*, which was staged in Srikshetra (Puri). *Prabodhachandrodaya Natak* was written by one Krishna Misra in the eleventh century, which was staged in Varanasi with full royal patronage. There the dramatist has introduced himself as a poet from Orissa. Gajapati Kapilendra Dev, the founder of the Surya dynasty, was not only a patron of theatre but was also himself an eminent dramatist. He wrote *Parasurama Vijaya Vyayoga*, a drama in one act, where a song in the regional language for the first time found place.

The patronisation of the rich heritage of Sanskrit plays by the kings, zamindars and rich people continued till the late 18th century. Parallel to these plays a smooth current of the theatre of the masses also flowed incessantly which provided an easy source of entertainment for the common people. The folk

dramas included the Lila, the Suangas, the Gotipua Nacha, the Danda Nata, the Chou and of course, *yatra*. These dramas were simple, straightforward and yet artistic, just like the nature of the rural people. Their common feelings were depicted in these genres of entertainment. Gods of heaven were even treated like ordinary people. Lord Siva had to plough field, goddess Lakshmi had to face banishment from in-law's house by her irritated husband. Rules and regulations of the dramaturgy were never adhered to. Pure and simple entertainment was the main motto of such dramas. These media acted as a great solace for the audience. The origin of the folk drama may be traced with the origin of the society or in other words the very existence of such form of entertainment is deeply connected with the society.

Yatra is the largest and most popular medium of entertainment in Orissa. Although in recent years video and films have invaded the remote villages, *yatra* still continues to be the major source of entertainment. The *yatra* form which spreads over a vast canvas, does not use any elaborate stage preparation. The presentation of the *yatra* is actually a wonderful blending of Natyadharmi (stylised) with Lokadharmi (realistic) and the resultant effect is highly theatrical. But, despite being essentially a rural art form, the *yatra* is making rapid inroads into the city culture. The *yatra* season which stretches from September-October to late-April has successfully managed to wean away even avid theatre and screen lovers. Though it may be said that today's *yatra* is more a modern one as opposed to its traditional counterpart.

Yatra is prominently is theatre of melodrama in which pronounced-movements and voice-throwing are essential for the requisite theatrical effects. In Orissa the plays and theatre, as elsewhere, have been intimately associated with religion. Two categories of drama, entertainment for the masses and for the classes, have continued to exist side by side and have variously

influenced each other. Dance has been an inseparable and integral part of the Oriya drama as it has been of social life of Orissa as a whole.

Yatra in the beginning covered mainly mythological and historical subjects, full of rough but god humour, and plenty of songs; it also contained melodramatic incidents like fights, murder, abduction and rescue of heroines. In those days, apart from entertainment value, most of the folk plays carried messages for the humanity at large, and society in particular. Its fine imaginative spirit, and higher artistic values gave it a superior position to any other form of entertainment. The *yatra*, described by many as the people's theatre or mass-theatre, is generally staged under open sky in an open stage. The arena is surrounded on all sides by the audience.

Yatra has gradually been modernised. Social plays have been introduced. Blank verse and prose dialogues are used in modern *yatras* and the dramas are now divided into acts and scenes, which were not the style before. Modern costumes and recent cinema-style acting are also introduced. Application of light and sound tricks have certainly given it a modern look, but it has lost its traditional flavour for ever. This is a permanent loss.

It is now very difficult to trace the ancient form of the *yatra* as all the folk dramas developed through an oral tradition. The scripts were never written, the story, songs and dialogues only passed from people to people and the participants had to get it by heart.

Oriya *yatra* originated from the religious tradition of the region. Primarily it was musical. Development of plot, change of scenes, etc., were indicated through melodious songs.

During the last century Oriya *yatra* had links with its Bengali counterpart, Orissa and Bengal being two neighbouring states and culturally linked for a long time. Gopal Das, who actually

inspired the famous Jorasanko Theatre of Bengal, was an Oriya. He, in the last century, enlivened the *yatra* tradition through regular performances in various parts of that region. Likewise some Bengali artists also contributed highly to the development of Oriya *yatra*. Hence the influence was reciprocal.

During the second half of the last century, a strong voice of protest was raised by some people against the rural dramatic performances. They accused it of obscenity. These views were flashed in the then newspapers and periodicals. The performance of *yatra*, they alleged, was so cheap and vulgur that it was not possible to witness it with family and friends. It cannot be said exactly how much truth was there in such accusation. But one thing is obvious that these performances used in plenty various songs from the medieval authors, which were erotic in content. Moreover contemporary poets also followed the tradition of their medieval counterparts. It may be noted that during the second half of the last century there was an awakening and demand to free every sphere of society from the medieval conservatism. It was mainly due to the spread of Weastern education and the establishment of the Brahma Samaj by Raja Rammohan Ray. However, during ths transit period, the very existence of the *yatra* was at stake due to the attacks by the puritans, who were then the influencial persons of the society. Yet it crossed the hurdle of the time and survived, thanks to the determination of its patrons.

Sankar Misra, who is considered as the first *yatra* organiser of Orissa, hailed from Puri. He had a mobile troupe and he performed *yatra* throughtout Orissa. Krupasindhu Misra, an inhabitant of village Depal (Midnapur district), was his able disciple. Born in 1832, he wrote his first *yatra* at the age of 16. It is said that he wrote more than one hundred plays. Some of his popular works include *Lalita Haran, Sachala Haran, Chandravati Haran, Baghambar* and *Manohar Phasyara*. These are still popular in Midnapur area. He was influenced, like

other *yatra* writers of his time, by Sarala Das (15th century), the Adikavi of Orissa, who created a rich tradition of Haranas (abduction) and Maranas (slayings) in his great epic *Mahabharat*. It will be evident from our later discussion, how Krupasindhu Misra first paved his way into Sarala's literature and collected his plot from his work. He may be taken as the pioneer in this respect. The tradition set by him was faithfully followed by the later *yatra* writers.

Jagannath Pani (1836-1897), a *yatra*-wright from Bhadrak (Balasore district), one of the contamporaries of Misra, wrote atleast 30 *yatras* during his life time. He collected his plots from the *Mahabharat, Ramayan* and the *Bhagabat*. *Suvadra Parinaya, Ushavati Haran, Ashwamedha Jagnya, Mahiravan Badh, Daksha Yajnya, Parijat Haran, Laxman Saktiveda, Manabhanjan, Prahallad Charita* were some of his popular plays. He had a troupe of his own and travelled throughout Orissa staging his works. In most of his works he adopted a style which was full of rhetorics, and erotic in nature. As earlier mentioned, Gopal Das, who became renowned as a playwright in Bengal, originally belonged to Orissa. Sachin Sengupta, an eminent critic of Bengal, writes in *Banglar Natak O Natyasala* : 'After witnessing the *yatra* of Gopal Ureh, Gunendranath Thakur, Jyotirindranath Thakur and others established a stage inside the residence of the Thakur family at Jorasanko'. This Gopal Das was son of one Mukunda. He went to Calcutta in his late teens. Hemendranath Dasgupta writes in his 'Indian Stage' that this Gopal Das staged a lyrical play called *Vidyasundar Geetinatya* in Calcutta in 1867. He himself was a good actor, his voice was sweet and his performance in the female role was simply superb. His *Ranga Sava, Karna Vadh, Sweta Vasanta, Pravas Milan, Savitri-Satyavan, Valyavinod, Kanchi Kaberi, Aghasura Vadha* once created a deep sensation, both in Bengal and Orissa. His inclination toward this popular media originated from the rich *yatra* of Orissa.

Later, another *yatra* writer with the same name (that is, Gopal Das) became famous in the *yatra*-arena. He flourished during 1889 and 1935. He was born in the Kendrapara region of Cuttack district, and Kanhei Das was his father. He had a thorough education in Sanskrit and carefully studied the medieval Oriya poetry. Thus he had a very strong base. He brought a spectacular change in the *yatra* tradition by introducing new instruments, beautiful and gorgeous dresses, and heavy make-up. He himself was preparing the scripts, directing the *yatra* and also used to compose music and choreography. *Jayant Jaypal, Brajalila, Janu Bhagna, Karna Vadha, Madhab Sulochana, Jayadev, Sita Bivah,* etc., are some of his notable plays. His *Sahasra Ravan Vadh* is still unparalled and unique of its kind. He wrote about 16 plays of which *Dushmant Sakuntala, Rukmini Vivah, Pravas Yanja* and *Vakasur Vadh,* etc., are highly acclaimed. Popularity of the above play-wright attracted a number of creative talents to this field. Among them Trilochan Rayguru, Maguni Sahu, Dhruv Barik, Udayanath Rout, Munshi Hakim, Sk. Abdullah, Dolagovinda Mangaraj, Lokanath Padmanav, Dwarikanath, Hadibandhu Panda, Ram Chandra Swain, Balakrushna Mohanty, Bhikari Nayak came to the forefront. They contributed a lot in creating a rich tradition of Oriya *yatra.*

Mention may be made here about the contribution of late Krushna Prasad Basu, an eminent *yatrakar* of Jajpur (Cuttack district) area, for the development of *yatra* in Orissa. He formed a troupe of his own called Biraja Opera and travelled the entire Orissa with his party. Basu wrote nearly thirty operas of which *Sakuntala, Karagara, Krishna Charita, Bhuyan Pidha, Hari Anwesan, Babhru Bahan, Yajatikesari, Harischandra, Rashtrapati Sivajee, Ramai Deo, Rosen-Usman,* etc., became very popular. He was a person of many facets, himself being a music composer, dramatist, director and a powerful actor. His Sanskritised language was lucid and powerful.

Another noted *yatrakar* was Mohan Sundar Dev Goswami, (popularly known as Mohan Gosain). He wrote *Manabhanjan, Sri Sri Braja Madhuri, Sri Sri Brundaban, Sri Sri Govinda Leelamruta* and *Kalia Hati*, in simple and racy language. His plays are full of songs with spare dialogue. He being a good singer, could make his audience spellbound with his melodious voice within no time.

It is already mentioned that the term *yatra* was very wide which included *leelas* and *suangas* also. Almost all the dramatic performances in the rural areas then were addressed as *yatra*. Leelas were mainly divided into two parts, namely, Rama Leela and Krushna Leela. Rama Leelas were performed throughout Orissa during the Ram Navami (April) days and Krushna Leelas or Ras Leelas were arranged during the month of Kartik (October-November) especially in Ras-purnima. There was another type of Leela called Bharat Leela, which was based on the famous epic *Mahabharat*. Throughut Orissa there were innumerable rural poets who tried their hands in *leela* writings. Vishwanath Khuntia, Sisu Banamali Das, Dasarathi Das, Vikram Narendra, Krushna Chandra Rajendra, Viswambhar Rajendra, Pitambar Rajendra, Ananga Narendra, Keshab Patnaik, Gangadhar Pradhan, etc., mainly wrote Rama Leelas. Some of these *leelas* are still popular. Modern Ram Leelas are just revised editions of the old ones, where prose dialogues have taken the place of music.

Krishna like Rama has his own place of religious importance in the Hindu society. A good number of *leelas* were written depicting his heroic and frolicsome exploits with the Gopis. In the 16th century, after the coming of Sri Chaitanya to Orissa (He first came to Orissa in 1510 A.D.), a powerful tide of Krishna-faith flowed throughout the region. The story of Krishna as a cowherd boy and his sportive activities could easily draw heavy crowds. So a great number of *leelas* based mainly on Krishna-theme were written during this period. Ramchandra

Bhramarbar Ray, Krishna Chandra Narendra, Patia Divyasingha Dev, etc., were few Krishna Leela writers who became popular. This tradition continued till the thirties of this century. Babaji Baishnab Charan, Govinda Chandra Surdeo and Kalicharan Patnaik were three powerful writers who also wrote Krishna Leelas during this period. Basihnab Charan being a Baishnab himself, wrote *Yugal Rasamruta, Prema Vilas, Yugal Madhuri, Birahamana, Mana Bhanjan, Valya Leela, Radha Prema Leela, Bidagdha Madhab,* etc., which were regularly staged. He collected his plots mainly from the medieval and Sanskrit *kayyas.* Though his work lacked in originality, his regular pursuit created a devoted audience which helped in popularising this form of dramatic art.

Pindika Srichandan was another Leelakar of repute, who flourished during this time. His *Vasanta Rasa* was once upon a time very popular throughout Orissa. He conceived a new type of language for his work. He utilised Bengali language and Kirtan tune. Instantly this novel style was accepted by the audience. Govinda Chandra Surdeo (Kendrapara, Cuttack district) is a memorable name in the field of *leela*. He tried and succeeded in modernising the *leelas*. He added more prose dialogues in his works and brought revolutionary change by introducing the proscenium for his performances. He divided his work into acts and scenes, composed music in modern tunes and utilised gorgeous dresses. Within a short time his performances gained momentum and Surdeo became quite popular. His *Rasa Leela, Manbhanjan, Sakhigopal, Indra Sabha, Utkal Ramani, Mukunda Deva, Mibarputra, Naramedha Yanja* were highly acclaimed. His sincere involvement with this art encouraged him to write some stage plays also. He is the first person who dramatised and staged two famous Oriya novels, *Lachhama* (Fakirmohan Senapati) and *Padmamali* (Umesh Chandra Sarkar). Thus he laid the foundation stone of the modern Oriya drama.

Kavichandra Kalicharan Patnaik, who later became known as the father of modern Oriya drama, first started his career as a *leela* writer. He had a troupe called Sakhigopal Natya Sangha, which was popularly known as Kali Babu's *Ras* Party. He wrote *Manini, Bansari Bilas, Banavihar, Kautuka Chintamani, Vidyavali, Geeta Govinda, Kishore Chandrananda Champu, Preeti Sudhakar, Akhira Dekha,* etc. and staged these *leelas* throughout Orissa. Basically Kalicharan was a poet and also a musician. Thus the musical side of his work became very powerful. He was greatly influenced by Govinda Surdeo. Kantakavi Laxmikanta Mahapatra was another powerful writer of this time who wrote a few *leelas.* For this purpose, he took the help of Gopinath Sangeet Samaj, a mobile professional dramatic troupe which staged his *Vasant Vilas, Kaliyadalan, Vamsi Sikshya* throughout the region. He was also a poet and musician, hence like Kalicharan the musical side of his work became very strong. Kalicharan was the last flicker of *leela* tradition which gradually became dim at the advent of the modern drama.

Suanga is also another powerful form of folk-drama perhaps the oldest form of mass-entertainment. *Suanga* is different from *leela.* It deals more with humour. It has special appeal for the rural audience. Almost all the *yatra* writers tried their hands in this fine piece of entertainment. Toward the last part of the 19th century innumerable *suangas* were written and enacted by different *yatra* troupes. Trilochan Rayguru, Dhruv Barik, Maguni Sahu, Bandhu Nayak, Laxminarayan Das, Sk. Nazir Mahammad, Sd. Umar Ali, Mohan Sahu, etc., are just few names, who had some printing evidences to their credit in this field. One of the *suangas* which has exerted a lot of influence on Oriya life and society for centuries is the *Deulatola Suanga* by Vipra Nilambar Das, who belonged to the 15th century A.D. The *suang* depicts the legendary episode of the building of the famous temple of Jagannath at Puri. Though the *suang* in early stage carried no scene divisions and the story was narrated in

the form of a long poem with characters conversing in direct speech, later, however, the verse-dialogues were added with various traditional tunes suited to the emotional contents. The narrative portions of *suanga* were sung by a band of chorus singers. *Suanga* is a form of *geetabhinaya* or opera in which all the characters deliver their dialogues singing. The refrain of each song-dialogue is loudly repeated by the chorus singers. *Suanga* as a developed form of folk-play came into existence during the last quarter of the 19th century.

The *leelas* and *suangas*, the two most powerful forms of folk-plays paved the way for *yatra*, particularly the improvement over the prevailing *suang* tradition in this region made room for growth and development of *yatra* during the last quarter of the 19th century. Most of the pioneers in the field of *yatra* in Orissa started their career as *suanga* writers and performers. Though Oriya *yatra* was influenced by the *yatra* of Bengal during this period, it did not imitate the later blindly. By this time *yatra* started changing its form with the introduction of dialogues in blank verse. However, the musical dialogues were not totally dispensed with.

Yatra, in Orissa, still hold its popularity as it adopts to the changing times. During recent years it has changed its texture to a great extent. A few decades ago the *yatra* themes were mostly confined to mythology, history and popular legends. But at present, most of the plays are based on social themes or historical themes with a social undertone.

Though the modern films have a deep and extensive influence on the present day *yatra*, it still maintains its own characteristics of mass appeal. The use of songs as a vital media for expression of emotions is still adhered to. Dances, as previously, are added in plenty. *Yatra* is popular as it provides entertainment to the common mass with glamour of dance, drama and music. Its performance in open air, with thousands of spectators all around, creates an atmosphere of open and free

enjoyment. In recent times, the *yatra* has also changed its form to cope with the urban tests. As the distance between rural and urban taste is rapidly decreasing, *yatra* is becoming popular among the audiences of both the areas.

Among those who modernised and revolutionised *yatra* in Orissa, the most celebrated names are that of late Baishnab Pani and his contemporary Balakurshna Mohanty. These two were luminaries in the domain of the dramatic world of Orissa and almost ruled this branch of entertainment up to the fifties of the present century.

2

Pani the Man

Baishnab Pani was born in a lower-middle class family of Kothapada village, in the district of Cuttack, to Sudarsan Pani and Chanda Devi, in 1882. It was a fullmoon night and also a Thursday. In Hindu society Thursday is considered as the day of Goddess Laxmi though paradoxically his birth did not bring any property to his family. Pani had a very disturbed and miserable childhood. Born in a poor family, he had to bear the pangs of poverty every now and then. He was also an ailing child and on some occasions, his very life was endangered. Due to poverty, his parents could not arrange proper treatment for him. In this region it was a common practice then to leave an ailing child totally under god's grace. Thus ailing Pani was converted as Baishnab and was left under the mercy of Lord Jagannath. Thus, though he was named as Satrughna in his childhood, after conversion, his name was changed to Baishnab. Baishnab started his primary education under the guidance of one Kalpataru Vedi. Being the son of a conservative Brahmin family, he had to go through the 'Upanayan' (Thread giving) ceremony at the age of eleven. Then he was sent to the Mahanta of Kothapada Math where he had to do many odd jobs to earn his livelihood and maintain his family also. It was at this stage that one Sivaram Singh entered his life as a preceptor. He was impressed by the the spontaneous impishness of the boy.

Sivaram, who was an expert in almost all the branches of fine arts, inspired the young boy to translate his instincts into action. His inclination toward acting was encouraged. Though Pani read upto Class VI and was compelled, due to poverty, to close this chapter for life, his urge for knowledge took him to medieval Oriya poetry. He read these works at his personal effort. Being a Brahmin, he had first-hand knowledge of Sanskrit which was enhanced by regular practice. As a *pala* singer he had to read *Amar Kosha, Sarbasara Vyakaran*, five *Mahakavyas* and *Chanakya Neeti*, etc. He had a sharp memory and never forgot a thing once read or learnt. Later, when he devoted his full time as a writer the knowledge so acquired helped him a lot.

Pani as a boy was restless and was not satisfied with his position in life. He very frequently changed his profession. He organised a *pala* group at the age of nineteen and started earning fame as a learned and good *pala* singer. He could have continued in the profession and become proficient in the art of *pala* thereby earning fame and name in this field. His restless inner spirit which troubled him often could also have cooled down. But suddenly, there occured a very sad incident, which changed his mode of life. It is customary in Orissa to have a celebration on the twenty-first day of a child's birth. A name is given to the newborn and a *pala* is arranged on the same night wishing for the long life, future happiness and prosperity of the child. The master of *pala*-troupe (popularly addressed as *mula-gahana* or the chief singer) blesses the new born. On one such occasion Pani was invited to perform a puja, which he did with all sincerity. But unfortunately the blessed child expired the same night. This pathetic incident moved the heart of the young performer so much that he instantly decided to discard that profession and to look for a new pasture.

Pani remained jobless for sometime. Then he took up employment as an *ustad* (Master) to train an opera troupe in

a nearby village called Malihata. Then the number of *yatra* troupes in Orissa were very few. Within a short time Pani's troupe earned a good name. He was regularly invited with his troupe to perform in Cuttack and Puri districts.

But, in the beginning, he was just a master and his job was to train the actors and prepare them for the shows. For this purpose he had to depend upon others' scripts. He was not a writer then. Once, a very peculiar incident occured, which almost compelled him to try his hands in the field of creative writing. Though printing presses had already come to Orissa by then, the practice was not to print the script, rather keep the manuscript in the hand-written form and treat it as the sole property of a particular troupe. The professional groups rehearsed from the preserved manuscripts. It is quite natural that there was professional jealousy amongst the troupes. One Gobardhan Nayak, also a playwright, was in the habit of producing good scripts. Whenever there was any competition, he usually came out successful. He had a very popular script called *Sahasra Ravan Badh* to his credit, based on the *Vilanka Ramayan* of the famous poet Sarala Das. On one occasion Pani went to Nayak and begged for the much discussed script, which Nayak flatly refused. Insulted, Pani returned emptyhanded and ultimately decided to seek for divine help. He went to the temple of Vinod Vihari, a local deity. It is said that he obtained the blessings of the God after seven days and emerged as a creative writer. He selected a Kadamba tree near the temple of the village-goddess under which he first tried his hands in the field of writing. The place was surrounded from all sides by the *smasan* (burning place) of village Malihata. It was very calm and quiet and was covered with thick growth of trees and plants. Only occasional chirping of birds broke the deep silence of the place. In this solitary place a new star was born, who for years, controlled and lighted the *yatra* arena of Orissa.

Pani composed his first *yatra*-play *Meghanad Badh* at the age of twenty-one (1903). After this he never looked back. Famous and still popular, *Ranga Sabha* followed suit. In this work he followed Gopal Das, the famous *yatra* writer of the time. He also wrote *Braja Leela* at this time. But Pani had to leave the Malihata professional troupe and also the locality, perhpas due to some family trouble and had to cut off his connections with the *yatra* for some time. He left for Calcutta where he lived in self-banishment. It is not known what Pani was doing during this period. However, Calcutta was not unknown to Pani as he had already visited the place earlier with his troupe. In this city Oriyas live in large number. Pani freely mixed with them, gained a lot of experience about human characters which he successfully utilised in his later works. This incident of his life occured sometime during the first decade of the current century.

Pani had a cursed personal life. It was not peaceful. According to the then custom, Pani married at the age of nineteen in his own caste. But he was not happy with his wife. After some time he left his wife and lived with a washer-woman called Hara. This was a sensational incident at that time. The conservative Brahmin society cut off all relations with this *patita* (out-caste) youngman and immediately expelled him from the village. Though tortured till his death, he never repented his act. This reminds us about Chandi Das, the great *padavali* poet of Bengal, whose relation with a washer-woman called Rami has become a legend. Chandi Das discarded his family and society for the sake of love and despite huge barriers put on by the society, united himself with his lady-love; so did Pani. Pani was an easy-go type man doing whatever he liked. He never hesitated to do any sort of work in his life, beginning from theft, goondaism, romance, even visiting prostitutes. He did not hide any of his actions from the public as he has recorded all his adventures in his autobiography. His was a life full of adventures. At one moment he was spending his life

like an emperor with affluence and the other moment embracing the life of a pauper. He was not deeply attached to anything or not easily moved by any worldly affairs.

After his short self-banishment in Calcutta, he returned to Kothpada and resumed work, this time more seriously. Within no time he organised his own *yatra* troupe with the help of the Mahanta of Kothpada Math. From that time onwards he regularly continued to write and by 1910 wrote *Dhruv Charita, Prahallad Charita, Kichaka Badh, Harishchandra, Kalapahad, Dekhya Yajna, Ravan Badh, Meghanad Badh, Nala Damayanti.* These *yatra*-plays were highly popular with the rural people. Pani himself writes in his autobiography, 'Then number the of performing troupes were much less. Writers were handful. So almost every troupe purchased my plays and staged them.'

As a director with superb training in the *yatra*-craft, he had a very colourful career. Soon after discarding his career as a *pala* performer, he took up to *yatra* as a director and trained new entrants in the technique of acting. His first troupe was sponsored by Raghunath Puri of Kothpada. Throughout his life he worked with a number of *yatra* troupes which included troupe sponsored by the lady-zamindar of Bahukud, the troupe organised by Baidyanath Mahapatra of Anandapur, the Gualipur troupe sponsored by Jagannath Misra, Chousathipada troupe of Khandiabandh, troupe of Kulamani Choudhury and two separate troupes of the king and the queen of Rajkanika. He was in the habit of leaving a troupe at the slightest cause or intervention. His entire life was just like a child's play-house, built at one moment and broken up at the next.

Pani was familiar with the ebbs and tides of life since his childhood days and was habituated to live and grow with them. It has earlier been described how poverty compelled Pani to give up his studies at a very early age and earn his livelihood by doing menial work. He has described some incidents both

touchy and pathetic of his life in his autobiography. However, he was fortunate to get an employment in a school that gave him the opportunity to be in touch with the books. After a day's hard work as a cook it was not easy for a young boy to sit at his lessons late at night. Very often he felt drowsy and dozed over the text books which he had collected by begging. The boy could understand the seriousness of the problem. So he had to devise a novel way to overcome it. Before going to bed, he used to fasten both his toes with a rope to a pillar. When he changed his sides while asleep, his legs were pulled by the rope and immediately he was awakened. In this way in the dead of the night, he used to memorize the famous Sanskrit work *Amarkosha*. This was practised by him so long he was in the school-service. As a student he was very poor in Mathematics. Perhaps, apart from poverty, this is another reason that compelled him to leave his studies from the 6th class. The headmaster of the Kothpada middle school was so much impressed by the young boy's struggle to read that he arranged a private tuition for him with the local sub-overseer. There he was to get Rs. 4 as his monthly salary and one meal everyday for his service. The Sub-overseer was a lover of music. Pani's proficiency in singing impressed him so much that he arranged an employment for Pani in the irrigation department on a monthly salary of Rs. 12. The amount was lucrative in those days. For the time being it seemed that the goddess of fate had a kind look on Pani. But Pani's happy days were over soon after the sudden transfer of the sympathetic sub-overseer to a far away place. The new sub-overseer compelled him to do the work of patrolling. Pani, feeling humiliated, resigned from the service and left the place. Perhaps the sudden departure of his patron, dishertened him. Emotionally he was stirred and decided to quit. Then he started his life as a *pala* performer. This he had to leave again owing to emotional problems. In the final phase he was employed as a master to train actors for opera by the villagers of Malihata. This job suited him very

much as it was his life's dream to have a *yatra* troupe of his own. He stuck to the profession till his death.

Pani was a moody man. He abuducted one Kunjalata, a young-woman, and fled with her to Calcutta. But he left her there and married a prostitute's daughter named Pramila. This girl too could not satisfy him for. long. So he again left her and returned to his village. There he resumed his work as a *yatra* master and within a short period made a mark in the field. Pani had continuous weakness for women. Throughout his life, he came in close contact with many — Neela, Urvasi, Sarada, Rambha, Subani, Malli and Atar — all of whom were prostitutes. These women were at separate times attracted toward Pani's magnetic personality, but could not harness him for a long time. They were just like common milestones on his long route, whom he met in his journey, took rest awhile and left again for new ones. Pani has confessed his 'immoral acts' in his autobiography in clear language.

Pani was just twenty-eight when he was highly acclaimed as an established *yatra* director-cum-writer not only in Orissa, but also in some parts of Bengal and Bihar. Still then, due to his ill-health, he was compelled to refrain from his cultural pursuit temporarily. From his early childhood, Pani never enjoyed a sound health. Again his indulgences led to deterioration in health. He was bed-ridden and hospitalised also. During this period, to regain his mental strength, he started reading *Bhrigu Samhita*, Jagannath Das's *Tula Bhina* and many other such books. As a Hindu, he had faith in rebirth. Even though he could think of his rebirth, yet he could not gain peace of mind. Physical illness weakened his mental strength. He tried to gain the blessings of God through prayer, but without any concrete result. While in the hospital he lost his mother. Subsequently his father also expired. Pani had never good relations with his wife. Perhpas his bohemian life displeased her. Haughty exchange of words between the husband and the wife was a regular affair in their day to day life.

Continuous physical illness combined with long worldly sufferings perhaps forced a restless Pani to seek solace elsewhere. Had his married life been cordial, the life history of this noted dramatist would have been written in a different way. But that was not to be. Due to a strained relation, his wife remained far away from him. His attempt at one stage to find a metaphysical solution to his problems was not successful. At this juncture of his life he met Haramani, the last woman in his life. She made his life meaningful and influenced him in many ways. She was the woman who brought notable changes to Pani's bohemian life. Pani tried to restrain himself on Hara's behest and totally a novel epoch started in his life.

Pani toured with his troupe to different parts of Orissa and even to Calcutta. Within a short period he regained his popularity. In Calcutta he participated in a competition with Gopal Das, the well-known *yatra* performer. Pani came out victorious in this competition which regained his lost self-confidence. Henceforward he became the uncrowned prince of the *yatra* world of Orissa.

During this period he wrote several popular books which were highly appreciated. His *Utkal Gruhalaxmi* dealing with the contribution of women to family welfare became so instant a success that he had to extend it into five parts in order to cater to the demand. Perhaps the experience gained by him through personal contact with different women gave him an opportunity to assess the role of a woman in the family life. He was invited by the Rajasaheb of Rajkanika to join his dance-party as a teacher. His sincere effort to improve the standard of the dance party there pleased the royal couple and within a very short period he became close to them. Had Pani continued there, he would not have faced any monetary problem, which later quickened his untimely death. After some days of stay there, Pani was repeatedly requested to return to his native place by Haramani, the woman he loved most. Hence he left Rajkanika at the first opportunity.

Haramani, the lady who was a turning point in Pani's career, brought also some worldly problems for him. He had to quit his ancestral home, his family, his son and valuable property only because of his relation with Hara. He was ex-communicated and had to lead a secluded life far away from the locality on the bank of the river Virupa in a hut. Still he was not unnerved as his beloved Hara filled his moments of sufferings with joy. She was by his side till her death. This lady loved Pani like her own soul and blood. For him she left her husband. It is alleged that Pani's legal wife plotted several times to kill him. But Hara's timely advice saved him from many disaster. Pani was totally dedicated to Hara. Whatever he earned he sent to her. Hara was not just an ordinary woman of flesh and blood whom he needed for his physical pleasure; she was 'celestial', by which the soul of Pani was enraptured, feasted and fed. Hara died after a brief illness. Her sudden demise moved Pani so much that he lost his mental strength and almost became half-mad. The cuckoo that brought spring for the time being in the life of this lonely man and filled his deserted life with sweet song, flew away. Pani's happiness and his joy for the rest of his life was gone with his beloved woman. Hence forward till his death, Pani was just bearing the heavy burden of a life-less life.

The concluding years of Pani's life were full of sorrow, unhappiness and physical suffering. He nearly lost interest in life and the world appeared to him to be a vicious pit of fire. By this time he was ageing and his zeal for any creative actvity was gradually decreasing. At this juncture he had to face serious financial crisis. Of course this was not a new problem for him. But this time his mental and physical suffering ruined him to such an extent that he could not regain his strength to come out of this crisis. Pangs of hunger still compelled him to move from door to door, meeting various people, especially the politicians, who, he thought, would atleast devise for him some way for a respectable living. But no body paid any attention.

Thus totally neglected, Pani was quickly moving toward the end of his life. Some days before his death he made an appeal to the then Chief Minister of the State mentioning his pitiable physical, mental and monetary conditions in verse. This epistle, itself a fine piece of literary work, stands today as a silent witness of the poor conditions of a wayward genious who dedicated his entire life for the improvement of the culture of the region. Pani's appeal was lost in the vast bureaucratic machinery. During his last days, he had even no roof over his head. With deteriorating health due to high blood pressure, Pani was moving from pillar to post and crying in vain for help. Lastly when the once-uncrowned prince of the *yatra* world of Orissa was lying in the varandah of a businessman and waiting silently for his death, he was removed to hospital. There he passed away unnoticed on 10 May 1956. On his death not a single drop of tear was shed for him, nor a garland was laid upon his dead body. This ancient land which boasts for its cultural superiority did not pay him then the dues he deserved.

3

Pani the Author

Pani started his literary career as a dramatist writing *Meghanad Badh* in 1903. This *yatra* or *suanga* (as described by the dramatist himself) is not divided into any acts or scenes. This has been composed mainly in verse form. There are nearly 27 songs in this work, all composed in traditional tunes. A character called Adrusta Kumari has been introduced in the play. The quantity of prose-dialogue is negligible. The *suanga* opens with a dialogue by Siva and Parvati, the latter desiring to know the achievements of Meghanad in the war. Siva describes the heroic deeds of Meghanad, his *yajna* in Nikumbhila Pura, war with Laxman, and finally death in the war. The poet collected his plot from Valmiki's *Ramayan*, most probably from an Oriya translation of the famous epic. The drama starts from the lamenations of Ravana over the death of Veerabahu, in a very simple, lucid and emotional language. It may be noted that Pani has not blindly followed the *Ramayan* and there are a good number of deviations in his drama. To cater to the expectations of his audience, Pani has given a local touch in characterisation and arrangement of incidents. He has adorned his characters with language which is suitable to their respective positions. In fact, the selective dialogues conceived by the dramatist have totally localised the characters, thus creating a congenial atmosphere for his audience. As a far-sighted playwright, he very

well knew that sentiment plays a vital role in the success of any dramatic work, because a major part of the audience is influenced easily by emotion. So he has utilised different sentiments (*rasa*) in this drama like *karuna, veera, hasya* and *sringara*. Ravana's inner conflict, as depicted by the dramatist, has added movement to the drama. The war scenes, very carefully composed by the dramatist, lend a special touch to the work, which easily impresses the middle class audience. The *duta* (messenger) has added a special flavour of humour, which relieves all the seriousness and makes the atmosphere hilarious.

Pani, in his first attempt, won over the hearts of his audience. The reasons for his success are many. Religion has always played an important role in the society. Hindus from generations have read with reverence the great epics viz., the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat* and have been greatly influenced by these works. Pani, well acquainted with the sentiments of his audience, carefully selected topics from famous and popular epic *Ramayan* for his first drama. Secondly people are generally attracted toward various acts of heroism. His drama *Meghanad Badh* with a lot of *veerarasa* in it, therefore, could win over the audience easily. Last, but not the least, the reason for its instant success, is its language. Having inborn quality of a poet in himself, Pani conceived a very powerful linguistic medium for this work which establishes a good rapport between the actors and the audience.

The creative world of Pani was vast. Beginning from 1903 till his death in 1956 he was engaged in his cultural pursuits for more than half-a-century. His work can be divided into the following categories : 1) Mythological, 2) Historical, 3) based on Legends and on 4) Imagination, though the plays in the first category outdistance others. In 1877 the first Oriya stage-play *Babaji* (the Hermit) was written by Jaganmohan Lala. It was a social drama. But Ramsankar Ray, a contemporary of Jaganmohan Lala earned a good name by writing plays based

on mythology and legend. Some other dramatists also followed him. In Bengal Madhusudan Dutt, Girishchandra Ghosh, Kshirod Prasad Vidyavinod and Utpalendu Sen created a rich tradition of mythological dramas. Contemporary Bengali *yatra* also depended mainly on mythological themes. We cannot definitely conclude which influenced whom. But it is clear that mythological themes were the order of the day. It is a fact that the tradition followed in the folk plays continued to influence the stage-dramatists who adapted it to cater to the expectations of the audience. However, Pani wrote hundreds of plays on mythological themes collecting plots from the *Ramayan*, the *Mahabharat* and the *Puran*. His *Vakasur Badh, Khandab Dahan, Tripura Mohini Haran, Sakuntala Janma O Parinay, Kichak Badh, Karna Dan Pariksha, Karna Badh, Nala Damayanti, Samba Biva, Arjun Lakha Bindha, Draupadi Vastra Haran, Jayadrath Badh, Duryodhan Apaman, Godhan Haran, Avimanyu Badh, Ranga Sava, Bhisma Sara Sajya, Vana Parajay, Kamsa Digbijoya, Duryodhan Badh, Naramedha Yajna* etc., were based on subjects collected from the *Mahabharat, Meghanad Badh Suanga, Ravan Vadh, Adhyakanda Suanga, Ram Vanabas, Mahiravan Badh, Ravan Digvijaya, Sitar Vanabas, Kumbhakarna Badh, Gayasur Haripadalava,* etc. were written on stories taken from the *Ramayan*. Besides *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, Pani also collected plots from different *Purans. Daksha Yagna (Siva Puran), Prahallad Charita (Vishnukesari Puran), Nrusingha Viva (Nrusingh Puran), Dhruba Charita (Bhagavat), Prabir Patan (Jaimini Bharat), Sribatsa Paddghata (Nrusimha Puran), Laxmi Puja (Balaram Das's Laxmi Puran), Madhab Sulochan (Padma Puran), Mahisasur Badh (Chandi Puran), Samudra Manthan (Matsya Puran), Jalandhar Badh (Kartika Mahatmya)* are few such examples. Academically, Pani was not much qualified. In those days printed books were not available in plenty. Most of the readers had to satisfy their thirst for knowledge by going through the palm-leaf manuscripts. Those were also not easily available. One can easily visualise the

difficulty Pani must have faced to collect these manuscripts. It is his strong determination and perserverance which took away all the hurdles and cleared the path of knowledge to him.

Pani had equal fancy for history also. Being a true son of the soil, he knew that through historical themes only it would be possible to awake a deep sense of patriotism amongst his audience. During most part of his life-time, the country was under foreign rule and strict vigilance was kept on persons engaged in any type of patriotic activity. Hence our writers who wanted to inspire their countrymen to work for the motherland were naturally careful while selecting plots. One way to do so was to select historical heroes who dedicated their lives for the motherland and to work out the patriotic spirit through them. Pani followed this method by selecting few such dedicated lives for his dramas. Thus his historical plays like *Kalapahad* and *Samyukta Parinay* were written. Pani has clarified his intention in the prologue of *Kalapahad*, saying, 'By showing our glorious past on the stage we can expect that a deep sense of nationalism may grow among our countrymen.' Kalapahad, a Muslim general of Bengal, defeated and killed Mukunda Dev, the last independent ruler of Orissa in 1568, through treachery. Originally Kalapahad was a Hindu and converted himself into Islamism to marry a Muslim princess. At one moment, the repentant general of the Bengal Suba tried to return to Hinduism. But the Pundits of Muktimandap (the seat of religious learning at the famous Jagannath Temple at Puri) refused his prayer and insulted him. This irritated him and he promised to avenge his humiliation by becoming an inconoclast. He destroyed many temples of Orissa and finally killed the ruler of the land. He, on his return journey, even succeeded in dragging the idol of Lord Jagannath on the highway up to Murshidabad and finally threw the idol into fire. But the idol was saved by the Hindu wife of Kalapahad. The drama ends with Kalapahad becoming mad. There are many sub-plots also in this drama. Mukunda Dev's relation with Moghul emperor

Akbar, the united effort of Qutlu Khan and Rahmet Khan, Kalapahad's Hindu wife Golap, Kalapahad's pitiable mother, as well as Golap's firm inclination towards her own religion and her mental agony and several other aspects mingled with the main plot to make it interesting.

In 1192, a dreadful battle was fought between the Hindus and the Muslims which paved the way for the establishment of the Muslim rule in this country for many centuries to come. The battle is famous in history as the battle of Tarain. In this battle Prithviraj Chauhan, the emperor of Delhi, was leading the Hindus and Md. Ghori was his opponent. Prithviraj was fighting his battle alone being discarded by other Hindu rulers. Earlier, before Prithviraj became the emperor, his causin Jayachand was a contestant for the Delhi throne. But ultimately Prithviraj got it. Hostility between the two became severe when Prithviraj forcefully took away Jaychand's daughter Samyukta and married her. Jaichand, to avenge this insult, invited Md. Ghori to this land. Finally Prithwiraj was killed in the battle and Samyukta became Sati. Pani adapted this episode for his play *Sanjukta Parinaya*. The playwright has tried to arouse patriotic feelings among his countrymen through this drama. Secondly, he has successfully explored the charming element present in the theme. Like his other works, the musical side of this drama is also impressive. The dramatist used humour in appropriate places to relieve the audience temporarily from their worldly pains. There were also few more historical plays, viz, *Chandragupta, Mirabai, Yajati Kesari,* etc. In all these dramas his message is to awake a sense of patriotism amongst his countrymen. He did this with artistic craftsmanship and superb mastery.

Legend is a subject which attracts persons of different tastes alike. When enriched with some historical value, spirit of nationalism, and either human or supernatural element, a legend has always drawn the attention of the poets, novelists and

dramatists. Orissa is a land in which one can find such legends in plenty. Since ages, the literary artists of this land have obtained their inspiration from the legends and created works like *Kanchi Kaveri, Sakhigopal, Kalijai, Raghu Arakhita, Deula Tola,* etc. Pani being aware of the popularity of such legends, has successfully utilised these in several of his writings.

His *Raghu Arakhita* is based on one such legend, which is widely known and appreciated in Orissa. Raghu Arakhita or Raghu the poor man, who is the 'hero' of this legend, was a true devotee of Lord Jagannath. After the death of his parents, Raghu leaves his wife with his father-in-law and goes to Puri, the seat of the Lord. There he maintains himself by begging. Knowing this his father-in-law feels insulted and decides to get his daughter remarried. Raghu's devoted wife informs him about this and requests him to rescue her within a stipulated time. Puri, being a far away place and in the absence of any fast moving conveyance, the helpless Raghu prays to his Lord to save him in this critical situation. His prayer is answered and the Lord sends a *betal* (a celestial being), who carries Raghu to the desired place in time. Shocked to find Raghu returning hale and hearty, his father-in-law tries to poison him. But here again he is saved by the Lord. Finally Raghu leaves for Puri with his wife. He is protected throughout his journey by the Lord. At Puri the couple's devotion is again tested. A group of mendicants come to Raghu's house and ask for food. Raghu's wife goes to market to sell her ornaments for this purpose. But there she is asked by a grocer to offer her body for money. After taking consent from her husband, she agrees to the proposal. The man comes at the fixed hour to find the lady on the lap of Lord Jagannath. After this the couple lead a very happy life.

The dramatist collected the plot of this drama from Ramadas's *Dadhyata Bhakti,* a very popular *kavya* widely read by the Oriyas. In this piece of work, Pani's main aim was to establish

the glory of the Lord. Hence the play is mainly devotional. He has, however, added a farce to relieve his audience from the serious nature of the plot.

Sakhigopal is another popular legend, which has become the subject matter of many literary works in Oriya literature. The God Sakhigopal is now worshipped in a place of the same name (a place, 20 km. from Puri town on Puri – Bhubaneswar road). Gajapati (Purushottam Dev, after defeating the ruler of Kanchi (Salwa-Narasimha), brought with him Bhanda Ganesha (a Tantrik idol of Lord Ganesha, which is still worshipped inside Puri temple) and this Gopal idol. As the legend goes, originally this Gopal was worshipped at Vrindavan. Once an old man and a young man from far away Kanchi visited Vrindaban. There the old man took to serious illness. The young man nursed him to health. The obliged old man promised before Lord Gopal to marry his daughter with the young man. However, when both returned to their native place, the old man declined to have made such promise. The hapless young man prayed Gopal to be a witness to prove the authenticity of the matter. Gopal followed the young man with the condition that during journey to Kanchi, he would not look back. Unfortunately the young man looked back on the way and Gopal, as conditioned, became a statue. However, in that state Gopal gave evidence for the young man and ultimately the marriage took place. Thus Gopal came from Vrindaban to Kanchi. Purushottam brought Him to Cuttack. From Cuttack the deity was taken to Puri. There He devoured all the delicacies meant for Lord Jagannath. An irritated Lord ordered His banishment from that place. Thus He came to Sakhigopal. Being alone there, He regularly visited a beautiful girl called Laxmi every night. Hence it was decided to have a Radha placed on His left side. Laxmi became bed-ridden from the day, the making of the idol of Radha started. Finally she succumbed to death on the very day the new idol was consecrated in the temple.

The plot of this play was collected also from Ramadas's *Dadhyata Bhakti.* Pani, as usual to his style, tried to present the theme in a dramatic way. Here he introduced a *vidusaka* (jester) whose function is to create humour. Keeping in view his audience, Pani added few rural scenes which are just superb. The language of the work is simple, lucid and impressive. The music is sweet. On the whole this is a fine piece of his workmanship.

Pani has also written play like *Srimandira* and *Kanchikaveri,* which are also based on popular legends of Orissa. In *Srimandira,* he narrates the consecration of the Savara God Neela Madhab as Jagannath at Puri and the marriage of the Savar girl Lalita with the brahmin youngman Vidyapati. This legend of Aryan and non-Aryan matrimonial relations which paved the way for a novel cultural phenomenon depicts the religious tolerance of the Oriyas. When Mahatma Gandhi gave a call to destroy the social barrier between the touchables and the untouchables in the twenties of this century, Pani, in support of the cause, promptly wrote *Srimandira* utilising the legend.

The other popular legend which was dramatised by Pani was *Kanchikaveri.* Dramatists like Ramshankar Ray, Godavarish Misra and Kalicharan Patnaik have also tried their hands with the same legend. Renowned Bengali poet Rangalal Banerjee wrote a *kavya* on the same theme during the second-half of the last century. Oriyas have got an emotional weakness for this theme. Pani adapted the theme for his work and his efforts were rewarded.

In this legend the insult of Salwa Narasimha, the ruler of Kanchi, to the Gajapati Purushottam Dev of Orissa and its reaction has been described. Narasimha at first decided to give his daughter Padmavati in marriage to the prince of Orissa. But witnessing the role of the Orissan prince during the car festival of Lord Jagannath, he withdrew his offer. It is a custom with the prince of Orissa to sweep the chariots of the Lord by golden

broomsticks in the presence of thousands of devotees. Narasimha accused the prince for doing the work of a menial (sweeper). Purushottam on his turn took it as an insult to his Lord and prayed Him for help. A severe war broke out between the two countries in which the Lord with His elder brother also participated. It is needless to say that the Orissan prince became victorious. Padmavati was brought to Orissa as a booty and the prime minister was asked to give her in marriage to a sweeper. The wiseman took Padmavati to the king while he was performing his usual duty on the chariots of the Lord as a sweeper during the car festival and handed her over to him saying that he was the best sweeper available for the princess.

Pani devoted a bit of his mind to social and imaginary plots also. As it is seen in most of the cases, Pani has collected his plots either from mythology or from history and legend. In these cases scope for original thinking is naturally limited. Pani wrote some fictional plays like other *yatra* playwrights. He also adapted some popular stories for his works which were neither legend nor history nor mythology and converted these into beautiful visual works. In these stories, sometimes, supernatural characters and incidents were added making the entire work more dramatic. Some such dramas of Pani are *Khulanasundari, Kalaketu-Phullara, Sushil Malati, Choura Chandra Chudamani, Sweta Basanta, Kedargouri* and *Vidy-sundar.*

Sushila-Malati is the story of two ill-fasted brothers, the princes of a country who are exiled from their motherland (the first being exiled as a traitor and his younger step-brother to the seek self-banishment out of attachment towards his elder brother to seek their fortune elsewhere. The elder brother Sudhira becomes the king of another country by chance and the younger brother marries a princess and starts with his wife to find out his elder brother. But on the way his wife is forcefully taken away from him and sold to the elder brother. After much difficulty both the brothers are united and finally

return to their motherland. The plot of the villain is unearthed and the princes are reunited with their parents, the younger brother being crowned as the king in his own country and the elder brother returning to his newly-gained kingdom. For the first time the dramatist has introduced the *vidusaka* (who is also a teacher to both the brothers) as a villain, who is the root cause of all the troubles.

Stories like this are often narrated in rural areas. Children often come to hear such types of stories from their older ones, preferably from their grandmother during evening hours. The dramatist converted such stoires into fine piece of literary work, through music, high pitched drama and conflict. This drama became so popular that its beautiful songs moved from lips to lips at that time. In this literary composition, the wits or sentiments expressed by the *vidusaka* are highly appreciated by the rural people. Till today, whenever it is played over transistor, listeners attend to it spell-bound irrespective of their age, intelligence and status. Pani gave a rural touch in this drama, describing the day-to-day lives of the rural people along with their likes and dislikes. The dramatist's belief on the operation of destiny in human life has been reflected in the construction of plot, treatment of characters and analysis of incidents in the work.

Choura Chandra Chudamani is the story of a spirited woman and her witty son, who defeated all his rivals by seer intelligence. The story is divided into two parts. First half of the story revolves round the witty minister's daughter, Lovavati, who surpasses all the tests put on by the king. In order to avenge the insult, the king proposes to marry her. But before completion of the marriage ceremony, he deserts her. Lovavati, not being disheartened, comes to him in disguise, attracts him toward her and stays there for sometime. The hero of this drama, Choura Chandra, is born out of this relationship. In the second half, the dramatist shows different activities of this boy, who is

determined to avenge the insult of his mother. He turns a thief (as is evident from his name) and creates havoc inside the kingdom, sometimes cheating and sometimes just fooling the people. The king, being displeased by the regular complaints of his subjects, at last sets out himself to capture the thief. Choura Chandra fools him easily too. He enters the palace disguised as the king and asks the 'guards to thrash anybody who tries to enter the palace, claiming himself to be the actual king. The poor king, while entering his own palace, is severely beaten by his own guards. At last the great moment arrives. Father and son are united. Needless to say, the witty lady, Lovavati, is also acknowledged as the legal wife of the proud king.

In this drama the dramatist has tried to depict the witticism of the mother and the son through humorous and light incidents. The whimsical king has been paid in his own coin for his pride. All the incidents described in this drama were not totally alien to the Oriyas. Pani created history by writting plays on the folk-stories of the land and presenting these in a new form and with a novel approach. That is what one expects from a real talent. Here in this work, the usual magical touch of Pani can be found in its superb music, and in short and pithy social scenes, which give the drama a new flavour.

It is Pani who first brought notable reformation in the *yatra* field. As has been said *yatra* till his days was considered to be obscene and not liked by the intelligentsia. Its main purpose was to entertain the rural mass with whatever form devised. Most of the *yatrakars* selected the path of depicting excessive *Sringara Rasa* (Erotic sentiment) to gain cheap popularity and instant success. It is needless to say that in most cases these dramas did not have any social commitment. This was the state of affairs when Pani entered the field. He had a deep sense of dedication for his profession, where he came to leave his permanent imprint. He was committed to do something more in this field for the people, besides entertaining them. First of

all, he tried to root out the allegations of obscenity from the *yatra* field. His attempt to depict erotic sentiments in a refined form succeeded. He made them soothing, pleasant and impressive, which did not excite the animal instincts in a man. Sweet tunes set to traditional music suitable to filter the appropriate sentiments to the audience were composed. Pani was acclaimed to be a master craftsman in the musical tunes. He discovered surprisingly beautiful tunes which were adjusted to the demand of the situations and also to the nature of the actors. It is exactly not known how many tunes were composed by him and what were the sources of the tunes. Certainly those were not there before Pani's arrival. These tunes which stand to-day as landmarks in the *yatra* field are still followed by every *yatra* playwright. It is really very difficult to convey the identical impact of these music on the Oriya audience. These are inimitable. Pani, thus, established a new road, which could not be transgressed.

Pani was the poet of the people, in the true sense of the term. He wanted to take literature to the doorsteps of the common people. For this purpose, he had to change the language of his dramas totally. Though modernity had started coming through different spheres in Orissa, the language still being patronised by the royal houses, had not changed its medieval colour. As the language was acting as a barrier, Pani tried to change it. He carefully selected a language which was soft, poetical and yet easily understood. Mohan Rakesh, a renowned experimental dramatist of India once said, "if one has to explain the theme, the characters, the language of a drama after the show, then we can safely conclude, that is not a play in the true sense". In other words real drama is that, which when witnessed, will be listened, understood and enjoyed by the audience. Pani gave the Oriya *yatra* its status. Oriya audience witnessed the performance spell-bound, listened to the dialogues and music totally engrossed, and recited portions while happily returning home.

After Independence we have experimented and are still experimenting on many things on our stage. One of our principal efforts being to draw the audience very close to the stage. We are trying to destroy the barriers between the actors and the audience and totally assimilate them in one point. For this we have devised a method, which is called audience's participation. The acting arena is not confined to the stage only. It is stretched to the audience. After the great wars, Brecht applied this method, which he addressed as 'Epic Theatre'. Pani, the reformer of modern Oriya *yatra*, applied this method long ago, during the beginning of the current century. His players tried to gain the faith and patronage of the audience by coming very close to them. Many a time, questions were asked to the audience and answers obtained, the actors sat with the audience and appeared on the stage, whenever required; thus the entire area was converted into a single acting zone.

Pani had two examples before him, when he entered the field. First was the traditional folk-play, and the second, the Sanskrit drama. Both these have inspired him. At the initial stage, he utilised mythological plots for his works. There he instructed the mass to follow the moral path set by their predecessors. In such dramas also he had drawn a few scenes baed on contemporary social problems with an intention to reform the society. Mythology and contemporary society–both were united into one entity by him. This was novel, at least something revolutionary at that time. Later on, being moved by the activities of the Indian National Congress, he changed his field from mythology to history and legends. He selected few dedicated characters and through them called the general public to give a strong support to the national cause. Preaching of morality and reformative attitude were, of course, there. But at the outset, he tried to draw a spirit of consciousness towards our glorious past with the intention to inspire the audience for a great cause. At times he was severely criticising the British Government. In most of his plays one can find his nationalistic undertone, which was willfully composed for mass-awakening.

Hence it can safely be concluded that his plays were the actual history of the contemporary times.

Though following a traditional path, Pani's outlook was always beyond his time. We can find the psychoanalytic method being applied to decipher his characters. His mythological characters — may he be Ravana, Meghanad, Karna, Duryodhan or Krishna — were modern' in outlook in their behaviour. For this purpose, he changed the mythological situations into contemporary ones. Pani was himself a living encyclopaedia of Orissan tradition, language and culture. He has tried to utilise proverbs, usages and sayings, popularly used in this region to give his works a local touch.

Before him, the Orissan *yatra* was mainly musical. For the first time, he increased the quantity of prose dialogues. Poetry was totally conquered by prose, thus creating a new epoch for the *yatra*-performers. *Nata, Nati* and *Vidusaka* came from the traditional Sanskrit drama and a new character called *Adrusta Kumari* was introduced. This character was lifted from Bengali drama to which it once came from the Shakespearean dramas. Division of acts and scenes was introduced. Thus, the outlook of the *yatra* was totally changed. He could understand the role of this popular form of art as a powerful mass-media.

Humour and Pathos in Pani's Plays

Humour is an integral part of literature. For the first time in Oriya literature, Fakirmohan Senapati, the father of modern Oriya prose, utilised humour with a view to reform the society. His wit and humour stirred the hearts of the Oriya readers. Pani may not come on equal footing with Senapati, but his achievements in this field deserves mention. Impropriety on characters, peculiarities in dialogues, deformity in body and irrational ambitions were just a few areas he selected to create humour. He used it to enlighten and reform his audience. Before his coming to the *yatra*, humour was not very prominent in Oriya folk-drama and, to some extent, it was dull and timid. Pani

brought notable changes according to the taste of his audience, which even stands to-day as pioneering work. Pani believed that drama is a media to relieve people of their worldly worries and anxieties through entertainment, and humour is a powerful means through which one can directly communicate to his audience. Hence he utilised this through characters, dramatic sequences, incidents and dialogues. He composed many farces and innumerable songs, which were mainly humorous, to enchant and charm his viewers.

Pani devised for this purpose many tactics, the principal being the use of unimportant materials or things. He composed some beautiful satirical songs on wine, opium, bhang, fried-rice and soup, made of rice water. These songs, meant for creating humour, were presented through either a messenger or a royal guard. For example, in his song praising fried-rice (which is used as a common item of breakfast throughout rural Orissa — called the poor men's Pallau) he wrote :

Praise to thee O fried-rice (*Mudhi*)
You convert an oldwoman to a young lady
If pure mustard oil is applied, you become more
palatable.

Then he narrates the side effects of excessive use of fried-rice as an expert doctor. He adds, "If it is taken with green-pepper, then latrine becomes the permanent abode of the partaker. If it s soaked in water and used, then one suffers from various skin diseases.'

In Orissa, during the winter season, a special type of soup called *kanji* is prepared from rice-water : This is good for health as described in the Ayurveda. Sometimes *kanji* is used as a staple food also. Finding its importance in the lives of the Oriyas, Pani composed a beautiful poem on it which was as follows :

Praise to you O *kanji*
Who can repay thy debt,

Winter is your friend, you are also beneficial for the winter,
Bile is afraid of you
You are not palatable when fresh,
Staleness increases your value.
All gouts are destroyed.
The longevity of the partaker widens.

The poet here has analysed the utility of this poor man's food in a scientific method. Thus a neglected food ignored by the civilised people has become immortal in Pani's writing. We have said how the poet was reformist at heart. Whenever and wherever he found an opportunity, he utilised his pen to narrate the disadvantages of wine, opium and bhangs. Here in a beautiful song he criticises the harmfulness of wine in satirical language :

How can I narrae your qualities O wine,
You turn a begger to a king when taken with fried peas,
When inside the bottle you invite the glass.
For you, one sells his wife's ornaments.
You turn a wiseman to a fool
Many of your friends are jailed
Says Baishnab, if you want to prosper,
Immediately leave it.

He has enchanted, moved and also warned his audience by composing innumerable songs like this. Till today no poet in Oriya has tried to paint the harmful effects of these intoxicants in such simple, yet effective language. Undaunted faith in Gandhian philosophy induced him to use his pen against this practice. We have informed our readers elsewhere about the farces written by the author, which were then extremely popular with the viewers. It had its reformative value. He has also written hundreds of metaphorical poems. In these poems he has tried to create humour through improper simlies. On one occasion he describes the beauty of a young lady comparing

her to a love-school. He says :

You are my love-school O lady
Your teeth are the library books,
You will teach the passionate students.
Placing them on your bench-like lap,
They will be pleased to place their
hands on your bosom-desk,
You are an expert in geometry
The necklace upon your bosom is like the equator,
What is the entrance fee to this school
As I desire to be admitted there
Shall you be a teacher to Baishnab, O fair lady !

Sometimes the poet composed humorous peoms which were also irvonical. The powerful words are carefully selected which suggest the hidden meaning to the illiterate mass. To make his farces lighter, he even selected topics basing on humorous relations between a grandmother and her grandson and between a hermit and a sweeper-woman. In the sweeper-woman and the hermit farce, the sweeper-woman offers a betel to the hermit, which he declines for fear of being criticised. But the situation, after sometimes, changes to the extent that the hermit comes to terms with the sweeper-woman and lastly leaves the stage carrying her on his shoulder. The poet has thus entertained his viewers by light humour on one hand and tried to prove the power of love on the other. The lover boy, as the poet was in his personal life, always supported the cause of *Parakiya Preeti* (extra-marital relationship). He has written in his autobiography that *Parakiya Preeti* is far above *Swakiya Preeti* (Love with one's own wife). "Look at Radha and Krishna's Love", he says, "Radha is great only for this *Parakiya Preeti*." Many a time, we, while judging Pani's humour, may ask to ourselves : "Are these moral ?" However, during Pani's time his viewers demanded such compositions and Pani only supplied them what they desired.

Once, being requested by the Rajasaheb of Chousathipada, Pani composed the following poem depicting the lamentation of an old woman, remembering her youth in a humorous style.

Where are you O devil, my youth,
Once my black hair deep-blue like river water
To-day it just look likê a flower of screw-pine,
The eyebrows and the cheeks now create nausea,
Toothless mouth gives way to the lip,
My breasts which once attracted a lot of admirers,
Are not looked at even by a single person,
My sleepless nights are spent weeping alone on bed,
Oh fate ! why don't you kill a lady while young ?

One can observe deep sympathy as an undertone which outwardly was just a light satire. Every poet has a sympathetic entity inside his soul. So also Pani's sympathetic attitude can be seen in his various deeds and writings. We present a small example of this. It is mentioned earlier that Pani collected few 'fire-flies' in a white bottle and used that as a lamp during the nights for studying. After somedays this practice was discontinued, as young Pani thought this to be inhuman to kill so many insects for a personal cause. Throughout his life, he maintained this principle.

In those days the calibre and the knowledge of a gifted man were tested in various ways. One of these being the test of the quality of a poet as 'Ashu-Kavi' (instant poet). The poet was given a subject. He had to compose a poem then and there and present it to the audience. Pani had this rare quality. On many occasions he had established his ability in this field. For timely and successful compositions he was closely studying the situations. His sharp instinct and power of observation helped him a lot in this field. On one such occasion, as a *Pala-Gayak* (Pala singer) he was asked to compose a poem on a train, which was then new to Orissa. It may be mentioned here that the first

rail service to Orissa was opened in 1891. Pani instantly composed a poem on the subject and presented it to his audience, which was as follows :

Praise to thee, O Phiringi (English) carriage,
You are driven of nothing,
No elephant or ox is yoked,
Only the fire is harnessed.
Once the machine is operated,
The train runs swiftly.

In the poem the booking office, the engine, the noise created by the running train, the special steel bars (rails) and the social changes, every thing was beautifully woven into single artistic work. Requests were a common feature for a performing artist in those days. Virtually it is a test and also an ordeal which are connected with his very existence. The value of the artist is determined accordingly. On another occasion, in order to satisfy the demand of a grocer, Pani composed a beautiful poem on a young lady, using a metaphor. The poem is as follows :

How gracefully walks the young lady ;
It is a moving grocer's basket for a passionate man,
Her colour is saffron, arms scented-twigs,
Her dress is a scented musk, lips vermillion.

Thus the poet compares the tongue with cinnamon leaves, teeth with cloves, voice with grapes and hair with black-cumin seed. It is a long poem. The smile, the fingers, the nails, the palms, the eyebrows, the eyes, the buttocks, the breasts, the ears, the nose, everything has been described with appropriate similies so as to please his audience.

Pani's strong sense of humour was adorned with sharp wit. He had a very good memory which helped him a lot in this regard. He had utilised this rare power to instruct the Oriya audience and this he did through entertainment.

Pani was equally a master craftsman, while depicting the sentiments of pity and terror. From the school of life, he studied the lesson of pathos seriously. Behind his humour there was always a hapless soul which cried incessantly for a drop of love, for a bit of sympathy and affection, which he rarely got throughout his life. We do not know what psychologists will say about his restlessness and his lecherous habits. But it is definite that in order to forget his woes and anxieties, Pani indulged in such activities which he himself knew to be improper. Any how this tragedy-king of the Oriya *yatra*-world very well knew that sorrow was permanent in a human life whereas happiness was just a passing shadow. But then life has to be loved. Hence an optimstic Pani tried to fill up the gap through humour and satire. It cannot be said that he was an escapist, fleeing from the hard realities of life. On the other hand, he in his dramas, acquainted his audience with the pangs of sorrows. All his characters have to pass through different phases of life, a major portion of which is full of sorrows. Of course, ultimately they may get what they want. But then that was the Indian literary tradition, especially the *yatra* tradition, where happy-ending was a must. Moreover, Pani hated pessimism. Hence his views are always optimistic.

Pani knew that life was not a bed of roses. To acquire some thing, one has to sacrifice many other things. His sharp observation, while depicting different human emotions, has always followed this basic principle. In *Ranga Sabha*, Kamsa, the ruler of Mathura, has ordered to take away Krishna and Balaram to Mathura and for his purpose, Akrura has been sent to Gopapur. Krishna is dear not only to his old parents but also to all in Brajabhumi. Moreover, everybody knows the attitude of the cruel Kamsa towards this young boy. No doubt he will be taken to Mathura on some pretext and be killed there. Yasoda's compassionate heart fills with sorrows. How can she

place her only hope on the hands of a murderer ? Hence she requests the messenger of Kamsa :

> Destroy my eyes O Akrura, cut my throat with
> sharp razor,
> Poison me first, then take my son,
> Let Kamsa take all the gold and diamonds.
> I shall prefer to live on begging with my son.

But then who can go against the wishes of powerful Kamsa ? Yasoda's weeping-heart starts bleeding. She becomes frantic remembering all the childish pranks played by Krishna. Yasoda weeps :

> O my beloved : who shall address me as mother,
> For whom shall I wait henceforth,
> who shall coax me to purchase berries for him,
> whom shall I scold and
> who shall swing in my clothing,
> when curd churned
> who shall ask for butter,
> says Baishnab, I shall surely die,
> if you depart.

Powerful motherly feelings of an Oriya lady is beautifully depicted here. The poet has taken extra care in the word coinage, selection of tunes and use of similies. The song has become a fine piece of literature for all time to come. It so happened many a time that when this part of *Ranga Sabha* was being staged, the entire audience started weeping with Yasoda. In other place of *Ranga Sabha* the sorrows of the Gopi have been beautifully described through appropriate words and, needless to say, in tune (tune being responsible to ventilate the sentiments effecively). They coax, they plead Krishna not to go to Mathura and finally weep. Pani narrates their feelings thus :

> Have you forgotten our old relations O Madhab,
> Afterwards, when we shall not be there,

You shall surely remember us.
Now you sit on the chariot like a statue,
Don't answer,
Have you forgotten about Rasa-Leela,
And stealing of our dresses,
But we simple cowherd-girls can never
forget you.

The touching tunes superbly inter-woven with selected words controlled audience of ten to fifteen thousand in those days when there used to be no amplifires. The people listened to the pitiable weeping of the gopis spell-bound.

Before concluding, one more example needs to be cited. Pani has written a play called *Dhruv Charita*. Once Pani was presenting this play at Sukinda (an ex-zamindari of Cuttack district) before the royal audience. Kruttibas Harichandan was the zamindar. The scene : Suniti, Dhruv's mother, is being exiled by the king. She has already lost her son. Now she is to leave her husband also. She weeps bitterly, accusing her ill fate :

Being a woman who can endure this, O my ill fate.
Born to a royal family, my entire life
has gone astray...
For whom shall I live hence forward ?

The actor in the role of the queen Suniti created such a sorrowful atmosphere by his pitiable choked voice that the zamindar (who was sitting in the audience) immediately went to the actor with tears in his eyes and told, "I am a king. I cannot tolerate the humiliation of a queen. I shall protect you." The entire audience was spell-bound. As we have said the tune did the job, language came to its rescue, and of course, the singer's talent did the rest.

This was Pani, who was an expert in painting all the nine sentiments (*Rasas*) with equal mastery. Be it *Sringara, Veera,*

Bibhatsa, Raudra, Bhayanaka, Adbhuta or *Shanta;* Pani depicted it with equal ease and confidence. The Indian audience and readers are easily moved by anything that touches sentiment. Beginning from Bharata (the great ancient Indian dramaturgist of the 2nd century) till now all the grammarians of literature have argued whole-heartedly for the cause of the sentiment (*Rasa*). Hence when the audience listen, *Kandile Kiheba Karindra Gamana* (What is the use of weeping fruitlessly, O young lady) or *Se pracanda Kamsa andalina nisa* (The furious Kamsa, twisting his moustache) or *Chadare Dagara, Ada Hua mote* (Leave me, give me way O meassenger, I shall cut the head of Devaki) etc., they are simply thrilled by the powerful style of the author, which takes them to a different world, where the audience and the actor merge with each other. To get the desired effect, the poet has utilised the rhetorics fully. Alliteration as a device of rhetoric, has drawn special attention of the poet. In order to get the desired effect, the poet uses a single letter more than once, twisting it and punning it, till it produces the result.

II

Pani was a prolific writer. As stated before, within half-a-century he has penned hundreds of books covering almost all the branches of literature. The creative spirit within, always made him restless and only relieved him after the creation is completed. Besides writing *yatra-pala,* he has written some *kavyas* like *Shakuntala, Kishorivilap* and *Manasa Mangal,* where he has followed the traditional style, giving stress upon rhetorical composition. The cantos of his poetry are well-composed into musical *chhandas* (tunes) giving these a special flavour. It is not a fact that he totally discarded the practice of using Sanskritized words, but it was his conscious effort to avoid such words as far as possible. Though mostly traditional in his outlook, he tried his best to answer to the change of time.

III

He has written few short stories and novels also. His story collections named *Vimsa Kumara Charita* (The story of twenty princes) and *Dwabimsa Kumar Charita* (The tale of twenty-two princes) were once sold like hot cakes. These books ran into several editions in order to satisfy public demand. Same is the case with one of his novels *Dukhini Gobargotei* (a grief-stricken begger-girl). The novel opens with the description of the pitiable condition of a helpless girl and like his other works, ends happily. In his second novel *V. P. Bara* (A bride-groom sent by V.P.P.), he deals with the evils of the dowry system. He also passes satirical remarks on the system. Analysing some social and family problems he has written *Gruha Laxmi* (The goddess of the house) in five parts; the delicate relationship of the husband and wife has been depicted in his work *Swami-Stree*. This indicates the social commitment of the author. His autobiography is a unique example of a rare life, who believed firmly in truth and nothing but the truth.

IV

Pani was a telented musician. A large part of the success of his plays depended upon the fine music he put therein. He compiled and published more than ten volumes comprising his own popular songs. He has also written a number of devotional songs in the form of *jananas, bhajans* and *kirtana* (prayers). He also wrote a few political essays and essays dealing with social problems. His love for motherland inspired him to write innumerable songs and essays on patriotic themes. These works include *Utkalamata Soka* (the lament of the mother Utkal), *Bharatamta Soka* (The lament of mother India), *Bapujee Guna Kirtan, Swarajya Prasamsa* (Praise on Independence), *Utkalmata Durdasa, Srimandira Harijan Prabesh* and *Satyagrahinka Prasamsa*. His knowledge on philosophy can be judged from the books like *Nirguna Geeta, Olate Choutisa* and *Namavali Choutisa*. Once upon a time *Malikas* (prophecies), developed

as as special branch of scripture, were very popular. Poets like Achyutananda Das (16th cnetury), Hadidasa and Manidasa created some such work. The future of the world in general and the mankind in particular, finds place in a Malika. Pani also wrote one such book called *Agata Bhabisya Malika* (prophecies about the future), which is a glaring example of his serious thinking.

V

During the golden days of the *yatra*-play, a special branch of this visual art called Farce was developed. It is a faithful offspring of *Prahasan*. Farces were short, humorous, educative and reformative in nature, mainly based upon contemporary problems and local incidents. Sometimes these had some personal reflections, giving the entire performance a subjective touch. These were being enacted at intervals. Of course, the farces were not connected with the principal performance. These became so popular that all the organisers of *yatra* parties had to arrange such types of plays at intervals of their performances. Pani was an expert in this work. He wrote innumerable farces all of which are difficult to trace now. His *Natua Mahanty Farce* which was composed in answer to a farce of one of his comtemporary dramatists, Balakrushna Mohnaty, dealing with personal allegation to Pani's character and his immoral relationship with the washerwoman Haramani, called *Pani-Dhobani Farce*. Farce on Pani and the washerwoman became a craze and the audience demanded more such works from Pani. Hence, *Abu-Hussain Farce, Kyaparua Farce* (Who cares farce), *Al-ibaba Farce, Tarabai Farce, Gopal Bhanda Farce, Kelakeluni Farce,* (Farce on a snake-charmer and his wife), *Kalikatia join Farce* (son-in-law from Calcutta), *Ma Dahani Pua Madua Farce* (Witch mother and drunkard-son), *Nua Join Farce* (A new son-in-law), *Budha Budhi Farce* (An oldman and his spouse) followed suit. These farces were dear to the audience and added much to the popularity of Pani as *yatra*-wright. The social aspects for these compositions show the alertness of Pani to the social problems.

4

As a Social Reformer and a Patriot

Pani was a powerful artist conscious socially and his aim was to reform the society. He was deeply moved by the poverty of the local people and realised that the faulty administration was the root-cause for this state of affairs. He took note of the attitude of selfish employees of the British Government, who for their personal benefits, compromised the welfare of the people. Pani, being a strong nationalist, severely criticised them. He told his audience through 'Dwari' (a royal guard) :

> Fie to the service which tends to be humiliated by others. A service-holder is insulted unnecessarily; scolded by menials he forgets his self-respect and salutes the boss. By a single stroke of the pen his service is gone.

He calls upon his countrymen to be self-sufficient. When here in this world even small creatures like ants and rats can earn their livelihood by their own labour, then why, he wonders, his countrymen will be so incapable of doing so ? He has advised them to be self-dependent and live happily in their own houses. He further requests them to be near their kith and kin. His motive was to create a welfare State, where there would not be the severe pangs of servitude, where the mind would be without fear and where one could at least breathe freely. In several of his works, he has described the pitiable conditions

of service-holders, thereby preaching for self-dependency. He tried to inspire the local people against the British rule. He was a great supporter of 'non-cooperation' call given by Mahatma Gandhi. He tried to defy British rule whenever and wherever he found an opportunity. On many occasions he composed firy songs and had them sung before the packed audience. He was all in praise for the theory of 'non-violence' propagated by the father of the nation. He requested his countrymen to faithfully follow the path showed by the 'half-naked fakir' and free the country from the wicked 'Durjana' — 'white-coloured Banikas' who were 'cruel sinners' and cowards. He wrote :

> Awake, ye, thrity crores of Indian heroes and offer oblutions to your forefathers through the blood of your white-coloured enemies.

Addressing the mass in many occasions he has thundered :

> Lo and behold : the jails of the Britishers are open today. These are now being conquered by the freedom fighters. The strength of the Britishers have been sufficiently weakened. This Bania-lad (Gandhiji) has totally liberated us from the apprehension of the jails. For the benefit of the motherland one may welcome the jail again and again without fear, as that is the only way to frighten the British Government.

Very often Pani revolted against the tyranny of the alien rule criticising the Government in his usual manner. 'Fie on the British administration,' he wrote, 'as it sucked away all the wealth and strength of this country.' On many occasions, the then administration tried to arrest him but being afraid of his popularity could not do so. Pani, understanding the weakness of the Britishers, became more daring and openly censured the administration. The open-air stage was used as a media to convince the people to use Swadeshi goods and boycott totally all the foreign goods. For this Pani wrote :

> In no case foreign goods are superior to your own. Your forefathers have used the coarse cloth and unrefined rice.

> Why do you hesitate now to follow them ? Let us make it a point never to use any foreign goods.

Pani whole-heartedly supported Mahatma Gandhi's call, 'return to village, thrash your own rice and spin your own cloth.' Pani himself firmly believed that self-dependence is the first step for any country fighting for freedom. Very often, he advised the service holders to relinquish jobs under their English lords and to return to the fields, plough and till land, and live happily. We don't know at this age of industrialization, how Pani's philosophy will be accommodated, but that was also the dream of the father of the nation.

Whenever Government's oppression came to his notice, he raised a voice of protest–sometimes even at the risk of his life. On one such occasion, he criticised the tyrannic attitude of the amins of the Settlement Department, who were regularly taking bribes from the docile villagers. He, first of all, scolded the Government's greedy attitude to grab more revenue through the settlement operations and then giving a clear picture of the penury of the settlement employees, he openly and severely accused them of accumulating wealth through forced bribery. A song was composed immediately on this theme and it was sung by a 'Dwari' in a play. The amins, having all the Government power and support behind them, were furious and plotted to kill him. Pani had to take shelter with Ramasankar Ray, a renowned advocate and a public man, and could somehow avoid the wrath of those immoral employees. This incident has been described by Pani himself in his autobiography.

We can find innumerable instances of Pani's nationalism and patriotism from his works. Especially in his historical dramas, he tried to arouse public feelings against any type of oppresion, through heroes of the past. He invoked the past to act as a stimulant for the present. Secondly, his personal belief for the cause of independence induced him to use this media, for greater

public awareness. Thus he wrote small booklets, where he narrated the utility of Swaraj in vivid verse form. During the freedom struggle, Bengal had a bard-poet called 'Charan Kavi' Mukunda Das, who championed the cause of independence touring remote villages. He created a sensation throughout Bengal, being a constant headache for the British rulers. In this respect Pani can be compared with Mukunda Das of Bengal as they were having indentical attitude. Mukunda Das was an 'instant-poet' (*Asu-kavi*), so was Pani. He could easily compose beautiful verses, at the spur of the moment, as and when required. This was a rare quality which he acquired as a Palakar and cultured it carefully throughout his life.

Pani always dreamt of a society where people would live happily without any problem. Very often he was distressed to see the vicious atmosphere of the villages. Being himself a ruralite, his soul was with the village people. Hence, he always advised the villagers to leave narrowness and selfishness. Pani had personal knowledge about the village touts. He has cautioned the villagers in one of his plays to be careful of such persons. Through one character, he says :

> The motive of these touts is to make people fight. Through sweet words and vows, they first convince the people and then totally ruin them. Robbery, rape and murder are their main objectives. They can give false evidence, even for a very small amount.

Pani concludes :

> They will be punished by fate and Government will take care of them.

In some of his works, he has raised his voice against the hooliganism and goondaism prevalent in the society. He has also found fault with the contemporary educational system. In most of the village schools, the teachers were incompetent and selfish. Instead of imparting knowledge, very often they were

in the habit of utilising the students for their personal benefits. In his play, *Bhagyadhar* he gives a picture of the teacher-student relationship. He describes a scene where a student has been asked to light a cigar for his teacher.

Teacher :	Go and light this cigar !
Dama (student) :	Yes Sir (goes away with the cigar and returns smoking it). Sir, please take it.
Teacher :	Oh wretched one ! you have smoked and spoilt it.
Dama :	No Sir, I havn't spoilt it. The fire in the cigar would have been extinguished. Hence I had to smoke.
Teacher :	You scoundrel, tear out the smoked portion.
Dama	This side has been smoked by me. Sir, you smoke from the other side.

Pani, with the above comic touch, has warned the society against this type of teachers, as his aim was not only so saterise but also to instruct.

Casteism is a dreadful social evil. This system divides the entire country. During Pani's time, this evil system was at its highest peak, creaing an almost insurmountable chasm between men and men. Pani could visualise the viciousness of this dreadful system. The country cannot prosper unless total unity among different castes and sects is established. Pani, inspired by the Gandhian idea first of all, practised this principle in his personal life. In spite of being a brahmin himself he lived with Haramani (an untouchable washerwoman) and thus established an example before the public about inter-caste relationship. For this no doubt he was much censured and humilited. But he remained unpertubed. He adapted the story of Laxmi (Goddess

of wealth) from Balaram Das's *Laxmi Purana*, where there is a clear motivation towards equality and fraternity. Sectarian differences creat problems for the society. Pani himself realised the disadvanages of the narrow sectarian outlook of the Hindus. Hence in one of his plays, he dreamt of the marital relationship between a Hindu woman and a Muslim boy, a very rare and almost an unthinkable affair in those days. Pani always thought ahead of his time.

Pani gave serious thinking to prohibition also. Drinking, which was followed by prostitution and gambling, caused havoc in the society. Many families were ruined, many untimely deaths occured, and the society faced a great problem. Pani utilised his media and tried to show the darker sides of addiction to wine and opium, etc., to the public. His drunken washerman enters the acting zone singing :

I shall never take wine hence forward,
which looks like polluted water.
This water when devoured,
changes the human behaviour.

His Gandhian views induced him to preach prohibition.

Pani had great respect for his motherland and mothertongue. Some writers, to gain instant success, copied from other languages and published that stuff in their own names. Pani hated the plagiaristic tendency. Whenever and wherever he found an opportunity, he criticised this attitude. One one occasion, he decalres :

> Many contemporary poets are simply skilled plagiarists. They steal poems written by others, delete the name of the actual author write their names in the same place and boast to be poets.

This shameful act, Pani concludes, is just like taking the left-over of meals consumed by others. Pani has lamented on various

occasions for the deterioration of this language and literature. He criticised bluntly those who blindly translate from other languages. Being a great supporter of the mother tongue, he was really pained to see the degradation of his fellow poets. These persons did this mean job of copying as they were eager to find a niche in the literary field. Pani disapproved such habit and of such people. He was an out-spoken man. From his early days he was determined to fight illiteracy, immorality and sectarianism. He never bowed down to any illegal orders and his sense of morality and his idealism always induced him to revolt in such situations. In his plays a royal guard or a messenger is very significant. Their duty is not only to create humour, but also to represent people. Through them the poet has cautioned his countrymen about any forthcoming misfortune.

Literature holds up mirror to the society. Happiness and sorrow, expectations and frustrations one finds in the social sphere are truly depicted in literature. For this reason, the poet is a true historian of his time. Pani, as a conscious social being, always tried to give true picture of the contemporary society in his works. In some of his writings he has given true picture of the post-war situations of the country. The then economic conditions, mainly of the poor people, moved him to a great extent and he wrote :

> The world now goes through a period of transition. Betel leaves are sold five to six for a piece. Rice is sold six-and-half seers a rupee. The zamindars are forced to sell their zamindaris and seek employment. The farmers are no more interested in cultivation. Drinking and prostitution have become a common feature.

Actually, in some of his works the period of decadence that set in the country during the post-war period, is reflected. After such struggle we got Independence. But the general condition of the people did not improve. Rich became richer and poor

became poorer. Pani, who was closely observing the situation, raised his voice of protest against this state of affairs. In his *Prahallad Charita Gitavinaya* he depicted the pitiable condition of a school teacher, who laments

> My house has no provisions, my family is in distress, my salary is not paid and my house is not thatched. I have to shout throughout the day, and suffer due to hunger at night.

Previously it has been discussed how Pani painted the teachers, insincerity. Here he paints the other side of the picture.

Pani had intimate acquaintance with the hard realities of the world. He well understood that to bring reformation in the society, education is the only medium. Unless the people are educated it would not be easy to have awareness. Hence he shoulders the responsibility of a teacher himself and instructs :

> Obey your parents, better beg but never give up truth, love thy brother, love everybody with malice towards none. Even God, if born to this world, has to face hard realities of sorrows and anxieties. Determination is the true key to happiness. *(Ram Vanavasa)*

Sometimes also the poet preaches health and hygiene to educate the illiterate rural female-folk. He says :

> Smear your houses regularly with cowdung, bugs will be destroyed. Tulsi plant keeps your family healthy. Keep your kitchen clean to protect your life and health. Dry your bed-materials daily in the sun to avoid insects. Don't sleep inside a closed room with a kerosene lamp.

His independent outlook is revealed when he exposes the flaws of the modern day voting system. He severely criticises those representatives of the people who never come to their voters after the elections. In his *Kedargouri* play he has warned

the voters against such stuff and advised them to be careful while electing a person.

Pani's creative world is an infinite source of beauty. He has earnestly tried to show what is best in human being through his characterisations. Not that he has avoided all the darker side of a man, but he has firmly believed and proved that brightness actually shines in the background of darkness. Thus, love, affection, kindness, fraternity, friendship, sympathy, endurance, fortitude and patience are the rare human qualities through which he has seen his characters. His faith on humanism was firm and steady. The entire world seemed to him a beautiful piece of creation and he tried earnestly to draw a parallel picture of it in all his creations. However, his vocabulary being wide, he could conceive the best words with best dictions and tunes for his works. It can safely be proved that he never faltered to use appropriate words in approriate places. He was a well calculative writer and his sense of proportion was noteworthy. In division of scenes and acts of his plays, depicting various sentiments in his works, and conceiving characters and sequences, he has always shown this sense. He discarded all the procedures adopted by his predecessors and presented a total new style, where every undesirable descriptions were carefully cut-short and vulgarity of any type was severely dealt with. His motive was to arouse a noble sense in a man, show him the beauty of the creation and to discourage his animal instinct. In fact his predecessors were mainly exploiting this aspect of human weakness. Hence it can safely be concluded that Pani, as a lover of beauty and a supporter of 'arts for arts sake' cause, as sincerely tried to paint a charming world for his audience. His romantic outlook and traditional faith have helped him in this effort.

We quote below the assessment of Pani by late Dr Mayadhar Mansinha, a poet and critic of repute — 'Among the persons, who have modernised and revolutionised the *yatras* in Orissa, the most celebrated name is that of the late Baishnab Pani. The

gift he has made to the mass culture of Orissa is of inestimable value and is indeed deathless.' Pani's works which are replete with intrinsic literary merit stand to-day as a colossal monument in the literary arena of this region. About his contributions, late Gopal Chandra Praharaj, the compiler of first Oriya encyclopaedia *Bhashakosha* writes, 'Gradually the trend for reformation found its place in the *yatra* parties. Baishnab Pani is the pioneer in this field. He wrote innumerable *Geetavinayas* and utilised modern outfits, and musical instruments. He also changed the conventional form of verse into prose dialogues.' Praising Pani, the writer of *Utkal Itihas* (History of Orissa) writes, 'Gradually the rural *yatras* and *leelas* were polished and reformed. The contribution of the newly educated mass was almost nil in this field. Those who were deprived of sound education for some reasons, came forward for this purpose. The name of Baishnab Pani stands high in this regard.'

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Among those who modernised and revolutionised *yatra* in Orissa, one of the most celebrated names is that of Baishnab Pani (1882-1956). His open-air plays were enacted to packed audience and the songs of his *yatra*-plays moved from lips to lips throughout Orissa. Baishnab Pani's life-long cultural pursuits, diverse in nature, covered different fields, e.g., social reforms, education, politics, health and philosophy. A master craftsman, he has given lustre to a neglected branch of performing art. In division of scenes and acts, depicting various sentiments, and conceiving characters and sequences—his sense of proportion is noteworthy. He discarded all prevailing modes and made his audience see life from a different perspective and experience a fresh aesthetic pleasure. He left his imprint not only as a popular writer but also as a successful actor, an able director and a good organiser of different *yatra* troupes.

Dr Hemant Kumar Das (b. 1938), Vice-Principal, Samant Chandra Sekhar College, Puri, has authored more than thirty-six books in different *genres*, e.g., short stories, novels, literary criticism, children's literature.

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